

# **Engaging in the Arts: A glimpse into the virtual workshops and dance recitals**

**Merites M. Buot**\*

*Department of Human Kinetics, College of Arts and Sciences  
University of the Philippines Los Baños*

**Krista Marie L. Fama**

*Faculty of Education, University of the Philippines Open  
University Philippines*

**Abstract:** *Almost 24 years have passed since the first offering of the Associate in Arts (AA) program, and it continues to face various challenges, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drastically changed the world. As an educational institution specializing in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL), the transition to online learning was not entirely new; however, even though these students were already familiar with online learning, it was evident that the pandemic still had a significant impact on them. Aligned with the AA program's objective of highlighting and promoting the excellent work and talents of its students, as well as preparing them for their journey in the program, a series of workshops were conducted specifically for the fresh takers in anticipation of the culminating event, the Digital Humanities Fiesta which served as a means of arts engagement. This paper aims to describe the workshops and the digital humanities fiesta; identify the factors that enabled arts engagement at home during the pandemic, and determine how collaboration enhances creativity. It was observed that AA students were highly motivated to learn and share more of their creative outputs. Participants openly expressed that getting to know their fellow learners on a personal level greatly contributed to their desire to showcase their work. It is hoped that the culminating event of the AA program can be held annually to foster camaraderie and instill virtual artists' sense of responsibility.*

**Keywords:** *Arts works, Enabling environment, Virtual workshops*

※Corresponding author: mmbuot@up.edu.ph

## **1. Introduction**

The Associate in Arts (AA) program was instituted as the first undergraduate program of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) in 1998, as a response to the increasing need for quality distance education at the undergraduate level (UPOU AA Program, 2019). Currently offered by the Faculty of Education (FEEd), the AA program is focused on providing its students with the best of the UP General Education (GE) curriculum and a strong foundation in the Arts and Humanities. In line with this, activities such as the Digital Humanities Workshop Series and Digital Humanities Fiesta were open to all students and other stakeholders of the program in order to facilitate more opportunities for engagement.

Despite the troubles caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it was essential to keep on engaging the students and other stakeholders in the Arts and Humanities as this would not only help them in facing the program's courses but also, fuel their creativity and encourage productivity, especially upon interacting with others and their work. The workshop series focused on the topics of podcasting, digital art illustration, website creation, and creative writing; all of which required and encouraged the participants' application of "skills in humanistic inquiry, including critical thinking, scholarship, effective communication, collaboration, and creativity" that are at the core of the AA program. By showing the participants the creative processes behind each art form in real time by the experts, they were reminded of the endless possibilities given their own capabilities along with the many benefits of practicing these art forms such as the maintenance of one's overall well-being especially in situations of uncertainty (Buot & Fama, 2022), (Tang et al., 2021).

Given the nature and set-up of workshops, this mode of collaborative learning, where people come together to learn and work through interactions such as the exchange of ideas and peer review is indeed beneficial (Cambridge University Press, 2022). Compared to other learning set-ups, collaborative learning has provided more benefits to students such as higher achievement and greater productivity, more caring, supportive, and committed relationships; and greater psychological health, social competence, and self-esteem (Chetan Kumar et al., 2021), (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Throughout the years, educational and professional institutions have always made it a point to hold workshops for their constituents, to help them further develop their knowledge and skills in line with their work and passion. For students, workshops are more accessible, especially when they are conducted online (Belay et al., 2019), (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Furthermore, this hands-on approach to learning can easily consider and adjust to their learning needs and varying contexts. In higher education, workshops prepare students for the expectations of the industry by enabling them to grow their professional networks and experience a different learning environment (Fatumo et al., 2014), (Panigrahi, 2022). For working professionals, workshops provide them with in-depth knowledge in their

respective fields and industries (de Grip & Pleijers, 2019), (Connolly & Millar, 2006). Overall, workshops are not just conducive for learning but also for community building.

For an educational institution which specializes in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL), the new learning modality was not new; however, even if these students were already familiar with online learning, it was clear that they were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Buot & Fama, 2022). In this regard, the 2021 AA Digital Humanities Workshop Series was envisioned to give the necessary help for AA students to be fully equipped in their dealings with their co-learners by giving them chances to see them virtually and showcase their talents and interests in the Arts and Humanities. This current paper would like to a) describe the workshops and the digital humanities fiesta; b) identify the enabling factors in engaging arts at home during the pandemic, and c) determine how collaboration enhances creativity

## 2. Methodology

This study made use of both the narrative method and online survey instrument. For the thorough description of the workshops and digital humanities fiesta of the AA program, the narrative method of sharing information about these events was used, based on firsthand experiences and video recordings.

On the other hand, an online survey instrument was used to help identify the factors that enabled participants to engage in arts at home and gauge exactly how collaboration with others boosted their creativity. This survey was sent to the participants via email, which they accessed via Google Forms. Listed in the survey questionnaire were several close-ended questions and one open-ended question, the data from which would help the researchers identify the enabling factors for each person’s participation as well as the influence of these events on their development most especially as creatives. For the analysis of the data, once all of the responses had been tallied, descriptive analysis was used to process the overall result of each question.

**Table 1.** The sociodemographic profile of the workshop participants.

		Podcasting	Digital Art Illustration	Website Creation	Creative Writing	Total
Gender	Female	7	16	12	9	44
	Male	6	5	6	4	21
Occupation	Student	12	20	10	12	54
	Faculty	1	1	7	0	9
	below 20	1	0	1	2	4
	20 - 30	4	11	3	3	21

Age	above 30	6	5	4	7	22
Program	AA	11	16	8	12	47
	Others	2	5	10	1	18
Total Participants		13	21	18	13	65

### 3. Results and Discussion

The organized workshops for the AA community

One of the goals of the AA program is to equip the students with skills that will enable them to start their career as soon as they graduate. The organized workshops and seminars taught the participants different skills relating to digital arts and humanities, creativity and collaboration, as well as self-confidence and self-discipline, in the hopes that the participants could apply them in the digital world.

The first workshop focused on the key concepts of what makes a podcast art; and it included a step-by-step crash course on building and maintaining a podcast. There are a multitude of varieties of podcasts as one can find different styles like interview, conversational, storytelling, investigative, monologue, roundtable, and hybrids. While both of the speaker's podcasts are hybrid types, it mostly transitions between interview and roundtable types. One of the highlights of the workshop was the discussion about how podcasting is and should be considered as performance art. Public speaking is similar to podcasting in more ways than one (Bustari et al., 2017). The key concept of why podcasting is and should be considered a performance art is due to its authenticity and the emotions it carries. Like any form of art, each podcast is unique. It has various styles and it also embodies different emotions (Lindgren, 2021) from the hosts and guests to the audience. The name or title of the podcast is crucial as highlighted by the resource person (Feria, 2021). Although picking the right name is never easy, this will come to mind in due time. Feria (2021) further explained that the cover art should catch the audience's attention and fit with the overall theme. Having a podcast means a brief introduction, informative, and contains catchy music (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022).

With new emerging technologies that provide different platforms for art creation, it is essential that students and educators are kept up to date with skills that can help them with self-expression and creativity, but also with possible career opportunities in the future. To give an introduction and tutorial on digital art illustration, the second workshop was held where the resource speaker aimed to present a crash course on color theory, and the usage of common digital illustration tools with the help of free websites and applications that can easily be accessed by the participants. She also presented her drawing process and techniques, and facilitated two drawing activities. The importance of having a good color palette, and with that, the concept of color theory and the color wheel

were given emphasis. The diagram from Adobe Color's website was used to present the application of the color harmony rule (e.g., analogous, monochromatic, triad, complementary, split complementary, shades, etc.) (Adobe, 2022). In addition, the use of other websites such as Colormind (2022) and Colors (2022) to automatically generate a color palette, was discussed. For the workshop's editing platform, the resource person and the participants made use of Photopea (2022), a free website that allows for digital art illustration. This segment began with an explanation about the important tools commonly used for digital illustration (i.e., brush, eraser, color picker), and the corresponding keyboard shortcuts for most processes. A quick drawing exercise of circles, lines, squiggles, and other 3D shapes for a warm up activity was done. This was followed by the lesson on referencing as a valuable tool. Through referencing, the artist can have a wider grasp and better understanding of the subject (Dorr, 2021). The workshop included some techniques for shading and highlighting as the resource person's own style when doing an art illustration.

Another workshop organized by the AA program was the 'Beginners' Guide to Website creation.' Now that almost everyone is switching to digital, one way to share information is through a website. Learning website development and design may seem daunting, mainly because it involves learning how to navigate hosting sites and choosing the right design that would fit the needs and sometimes, a bit of skill in coding. The two-hour workshop aimed to orient the participants about the basics of website creation, different types of websites and how to start their creative journeys. Websites are mainly used to communicate with its visitors, preferably the owner's target audience (Garett et al., 2016). It is essential that the website's design can communicate well, as one often gauges the credibility of a person of authority in a specific topic or organizations and businesses by their presence online. People, such as bloggers or coaches can share their expertise and insights through their websites. Businesses use websites to market and sell their products and services and services. They can improve their competitiveness and reach through their websites. As society continues to move towards a more digital and online method of communication (Buot & Fama, 2022), knowing how to build and create effective websites as a tool for communication will be a good skill to have. It helps anyone to start building their career pathways that would be sustainable and yet will not require an extensive background in information technology (IT).

The final workshop aimed to orient the students about the basics and different types of creative writing, as well as the integration of science and technology in creative writing. Moreover, this also aimed to prepare the students for their own creative journeys and contributed to the AA program's ultimate goal to instill in them a deeper appreciation of the Arts and Humanities, by providing them with an opportunity to practice, apply, and share their artistic skills and outputs with the community. Given that the AA program offers GE and concentration courses in the Arts and Humanities under the new 2018 curriculum, there is a need to ensure

that all students who have taken these courses, most especially AA students, continue to apply what they have learned, develop these skills, and share their outputs with the world. By doing this, they will contribute to keeping the Arts and Humanities alive in a fast-paced and technologically advanced society. The workshop was designed to strengthen their foundation and prepare them for their future studies and/or careers, most especially in the creative industries, as would be the case for graduates of the AA program. Creative writing is a form of artistic expression considered as part of the fine arts (Loglia & Bowers, 2016), a type of art anchored on the pleasure of the intellect. It was also emphasized that creative writing must involve a thorough thought process both on the part of the writer and reader. Whenever one writes, one must ask the question, “Why is this piece of writing needed?” in line with the philosophy of writing, as each literary piece one will write must have a purpose. To help the participants better understand why they write, it was explained that creative writing is done to express oneself, to provide enlightenment, and to influence others.

The personal essay was introduced, which focuses on one important lesson based on a writer’s personal experiences, an example of which is “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The second type of creative writing that was discussed was the literary letter, which uses literary or poetic devices to express one’s thought and feelings in a simple letter, an example of which is “Emily Dickinson’s Letters” as given by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1891). The third type of creative writing that was discussed was the testimony, which is based on one event in a person’s life and includes events prior to this, the aftermath, and the person’s realizations from the event. Specifically, this focuses on problems one has feared and has already resolved, an example of which is “A World Apart” by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński. For the fourth type of creative writing, the autobiography was discussed, which is a self-written account of one’s life and focuses heavily on description and narration, an example of which is “The Story of My Life” by Helen Keller (1903). For the fifth type of creative writing, the short story was introduced, which is below 49 pages to be read in one sitting. In addition, this has a single unified impression and must contain the following elements: plot, characters, and setting. After the short story, the sixth type of creative writing, the book or novel, was discussed, which is 50 pages and above and must be divided into several chapters for the benefit of the reader. This must also contain the following elements: plot, characters, setting, point of view, style, and themes. In addition, the concepts of poetic content, form, and license were also mentioned as a reminder to the participants that freedom in writing poetry must always be with purpose.

It is still important to take note of the points for improvement that have been made by the participants, for the consideration of the AA program in planning and conducting similar events in the future. As stated by the participants, a workshop like this should be held for a longer period of time, wherein there is an appropriate distribution of time for the discussion of each topic and activity. In

addition, more workshops or courses on creative writing should be offered for more students to learn and benefit from. This workshop helped them gain the confidence they need to write and contribute to the expanding body of literature and field of the Arts and Humanities.

The AA program, in collaboration with the UPOU Multimedia Center, held the first AA Digital Humanities Fiesta via Zoom. This two-day event that brought the various stakeholders of the AA program together in celebration of the inspiring stories, artistic skills, and creative outputs of the AA community, most especially the participants from the 2021 AA Seminar and Workshop Series and students of several AA courses. The Wellbeing Extravaganza: Zumba Competition themed after the movie "Grease" was held. Along with the submitted creative outputs of different participants, the tales, experiences, and perspectives of the students, graduates, professors, and participants were also presented through another shared video presentation. Burnett (2014) discusses how education in developing nations has changed recently in the twenty-first century, the "leaderless globalization" of the international organizations currently in charge of education, and the early effects of the data and evaluation revolution on education. Furthermore, the author talks about development approaches to education and he strongly advocates for innovation to be encouraged.

#### Enabling factors in engaging arts at home during the pandemic

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns were in place, everyone was forced to stay within the confines of their homes. To adjust to the situation, new modes of learning and work arrangements were implemented for people to continuously fulfill their duties and responsibilities as students and/or professionals. Then, to cope with the situation and the sudden changes, it was necessary for one to make good use of their time and be productive by pursuing their interests. For the AA students and community, this meant their engagement in the arts from the comfort of their homes. In the span of three months, the workshops and digital humanities fiesta of the AA program maintained a sizable number of participants, initially only attributed to their interest in the featured topics. However, after consideration of the pandemic situation and the home-based setting of the participants, it was found that there were several other factors that should be considered, both internal and external from each participant (Fig. 1).

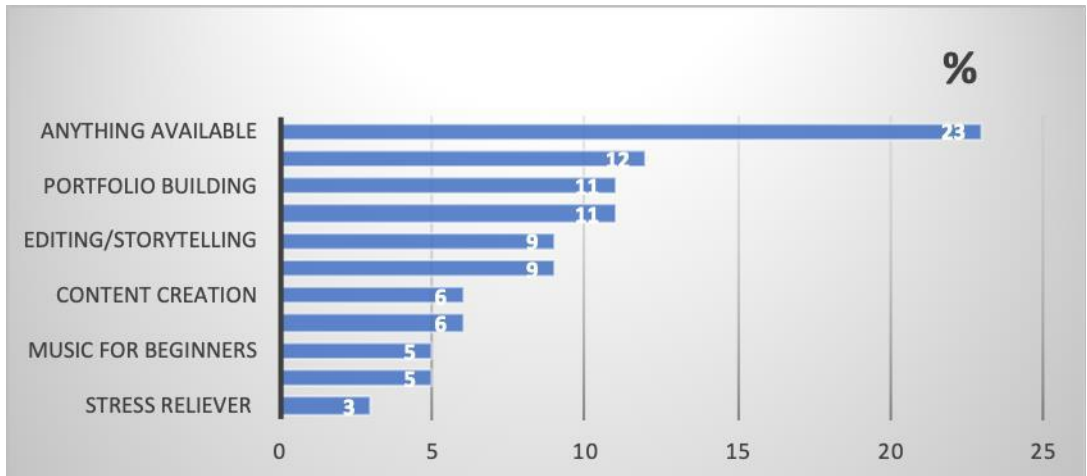


Figure 1. Different activities which the workshop participants want to join.

Given that they thought writing abilities were necessary for working in the class, the four workshops shown an interest in technical writing. One participant said, in agreement with the 12% of the participants who choose events that can improve their academic writing, "Since most students are dealing with writing, I think creative and technical writing will be excellent." Figure 1 shows the desire to learn more about their portfolio building. This is understandable because most of these students are at the end of their terms and soon will be working for jobs. There were 23% who did not identify a specific interest but want to join anything the AA program has to offer.

The online modality which is not new with the UPOU students has somehow prepared them better than those students who are first timers with this flexible mode. Being a self-paced learner has some good and bad points though. Li and Che (2022) thought the educational setting may be one of the key elements influencing how well students achieve in online classes and they highlighted further that home or dorm life is more clearly linked to a deterioration in academic achievement. It may be debatable at this point. Chaker et al.'s (2022) study concentrated on the characteristics that predict perseverance and success in online learning, where they came to the conclusion that socially motivated intentions are the key elements to take into account in online learning settings.

Looking at the enabling environment at home to help our learners in reaching the goal of learning output, Figure 2 shows that the interest of the learner is highly important to consider. The result of this current study showed similarity to Morse et al. (2021) which looked at the wellbeing as the end goal of learning activities. The program may organize any event but its success depends so much on the interest of the participants thus the initial survey was just necessary.



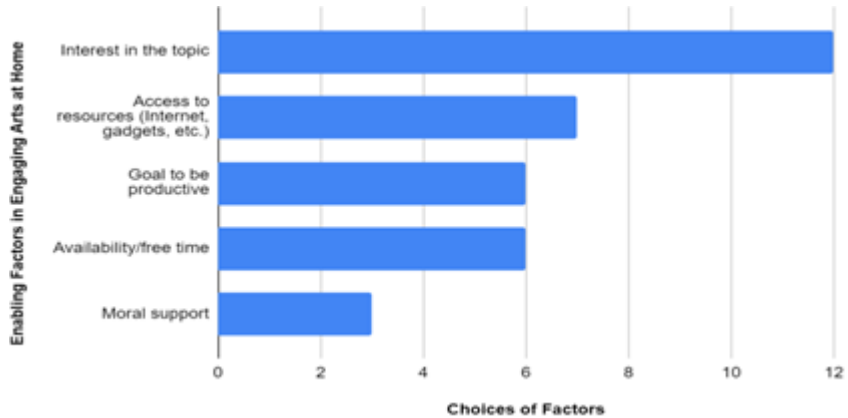


Figure 2. Enabling factors of participants in engaging arts at home during the pandemic.

The internet capacity is one of the limiting factors during the lockdown phase of pandemic stage in the Philippines (Beltran, 2021). Online meetings can be hampered by low connectivity thus adding to students' and teachers' disappointments.

#### Collaboration enhances creativity

For every student, collaboration skills are necessary to be learned throughout their academic careers in order to develop collaborative, inclusive, and culturally intelligent leaders who can draw on the collective knowledge of varied personalities. The academic institution one belongs to has the highest influence over the opportunities for each participant to be able to get the training (Fig. 3). Aside from the school as the main source of information, the faculty in charge and self-motivation to produce an output are the two most sources of moral support in order to produce a collaborative output (Fig. 4). Most importantly, for a school that focuses on open and distance e-learning (ODeL), the registered students are often familiar with the processes. Mateo (2021) however, issued a warning concerning the distinctions between flexible learning and online mode.

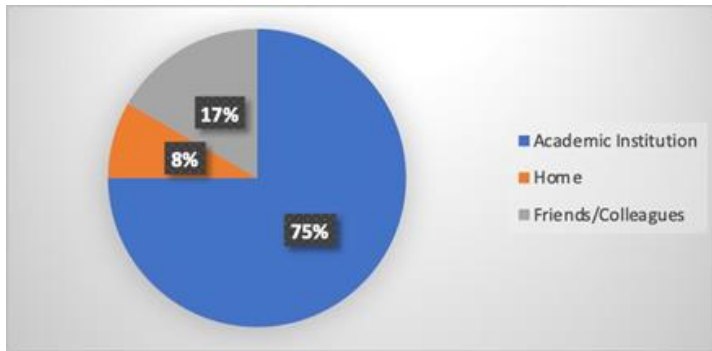


Figure 3. Sources of information that enabled the participants to join the workshop.

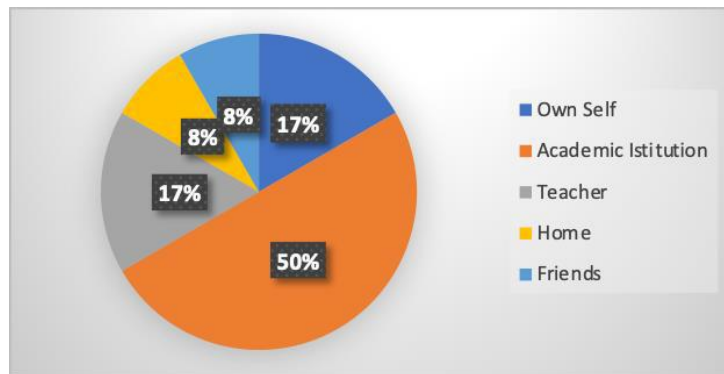


Figure 4. Different sources of motivation to produce a collaborative output.

Very positive remarks were received from the participants which can be summed up in: “It is very informative and the content of the program are very useful for those who are really interested in starting any digital output.” They also begin to see the need of peer evaluation and the expert’s opinion so that they can produce worthwhile outputs. While there is a need to check the emotion when receiving an evaluation but this practice has to remain as part of producing a quality collaborative work. The communication technologies which we have right now may have hastened this procedure (Schubert & Williams, 2022).

## 5. Conclusion

This workshop series aimed to instill in them a deeper appreciation of the Arts and Humanities, highlight their excellent work and numerous talents, and promote all of these—the nature and heart of the AA program—within and outside

of the UPOU. Additionally, these workshops were designed to develop students' further skills to keep up with the demands of the ever-changing professional environment, where there is great use and reliance on technology and digital media. These topics also brought to light the possibilities and results of integrating arts and creativity with digital technologies. Through this event, the AA program was able to showcase the excellent stories and talents of the AA community, and promote the Arts and Humanities to various stakeholders.

It is necessary to revisit the 2021 AA Digital Humanities Workshop Series as a whole and review the conduct of each workshop, in order for one to better understand the importance of the topics discussed and their impact on the students, the target audience of this workshop series. Furthermore, this will also provide useful information on other areas the AA program must address to fulfill the needs of students in relation to their academics and interests in the Arts and Humanities.

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